

Gaelic Place-Names: Bird names

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word for a bird is *eun*. It occurs in place-names such as *Meall nan Eun* 'mountain of the birds' in Argyllshire, *Suidhe nan Eun* 'seat of the birds' on the Isle of Skye, *Beinn an Eòin* 'mountain of the birds' near Torridon and *Loch nan Eun* 'loch of the birds', a name found near Lochnagar in the Grampians, and also near Applecross in the Western Highlands. These names probably reflect places where birds were breeding in relatively high numbers.

The Gaelic language also has many words for specific types of birds. There are numerous place-names which refer to the nesting sites of birds of prey, many of which were coined in earlier times when these birds were much more prevalent than is the case in the present day. For example, the Gaelic word for an eagle is *iolaire*, and this can be found in hill-names such as *Creag na h-Iolaire* 'crag of the eagle' on the Isle of Arran, *Beinn na h-Iolaire* 'mountain of the eagle' on the Isle of Skye, *Cnoc na h-Iolaire* 'hill of the eagle' on the Isle of Scalpay and *Sgòr na h-Iolaire* 'peak of the eagle' in Upper Deeside.

Similarly, the Gaelic word for a hawk is *seabhag*, and this is attested in hill-names including *Cnoc an t-Seabhaig* 'hill of the hawk' on the Isle of Arran, *Creag an t-Seabhaig* 'crag of the hawk' in Upper Deeside, *Cleit an t-Seabhaig* 'rock of the hawk' in northern Sutherland and *Stac an t-Seabhaig* 'cliff of the hawk' in western Sutherland.

Other birds of prey attested in place-names include the sparrow-hawk, with the Gaelic word *speireag* found in names such as *Creag nan Speireig* 'crag of the sparrow-hawk' at Loch Ailort, together with *Carn nan Speireig* 'cairn of the sparrow-hawk' and *Meall na Speireig* 'mountain of the sparrow-hawk', both of which are in Ross-shire. Additionally, the Gaelic word for a buzzard is *clamhan*, and examples in place-names include *Creag a'Chlamhain* 'crag of the buzzard' in Deeside, *Cnoc a'Chlamhain* 'hill of the buzzard' in Assynt and *Bad a'Chlamhain* 'thicket of the buzzard' in Inverness-shire.

There are many other types of birds whose presence is attested amongst the Scottish hills. Game birds also quite commonly feature in these names, with

examples including *Meall nan Tarmigan* 'mountain of the ptarmigan' in the Lawers range in Perthshire, and *Cnoc na Circe* 'hill of the hens' in western Sutherland and *Carn Bad na Circe* 'cairn of the thicket of the hens' in the Great Glen, where the hens in question are grouse hens rather than domestic poultry.

Bodies of water are often named after the birds which frequent them. For example, there is both a *Loch nan Ealachan* 'loch of the swans' and a *Lochain nan Ealachan* 'small loch of the swans' in western Sutherland, together with a *Loch nam Faoleig* 'loch of the gulls' on the Isle of Arran and a *Lochan na Faoleig* 'small loch of the gulls' in Sutherland, as well as *Loch nan Geòidh* 'loch of the geese' in Argyllshire.

Coastal names also reflect the presence of seabirds such as the *sgarbh* 'cormorant' and the *coltraiche* 'razorbill', with examples including *Rubha nan Sgarbh* 'promontory of the cormorants' in Argyllshire and *Sgeir nan Sgarbh* 'skerry of the cormorants' on the Isle of Eigg and *Biod a'Choltraiche* 'peak of the razorbill' on the Isle of Skye.

References & Further Information

Bibliography

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John Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Whittles Publishing, 2014).

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